Title: Interpretation

Name: Philip Tonner

Affiliation: Hutchesons' Grammar School

Email: p_tonner@hotmail.com

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Abstract:

This entry outlines the concept of interpretation in archaeology. It does so by surveying a variety of approaches to the problem of interpretation taken by archaeologists, including those representative of culture historical approaches, processual approaches and the collection of approaches associated with post-processual or interpretive archaeology. The entry ends by outlining where the concept of interpretation is in contemporary archaeological theory.

Keywords:

Interpretive, processual, culture history, New Archaeology,

Main Text:

An interpretation is a theoretical or narrative account of "something", whether it be facts, events, persons, or texts, that makes that "something" comprehensible. In archaeology, the "something" in question is the archaeological record: archaeology, being the discipline that studies the human past through its material remains, offers interpretations of that past. Interpretation makes sense of archaeological evidence (Tilley 1993). Archaeologists must engage in an "interpretive leap" when moving from excavated data to final report (Trigger 1996). They do this by way of what Gamble (2008) has called the "archaeological imagination".

In the human sciences more generally it is possible to distinguish "historical interpretations" from "scientific explanations". Historical interpretations are based on human experience, understanding, and language whereas scientific explanations are based on observation yet are abstract, constructed, and theoretical. In archaeology the concept of interpretation has gone through a number of different theoretical phases. Each phase has bordered on historical interpretation or scientific explanation to varying degrees. A broadly culture-historical approach remains a mainstay of archaeological interpretation. Thomas (1995) argued that much of the work produced by academic archaeologists in the United Kingdom, for example, still broadly conforms to this approach. Culture history approaches in archaeology prioritize the gathering of data, the establishment of facts, and the creation of appropriate

classifications of that data. An emphasis on inductive reasoning, bringing this approach into the border lands of scientific explanation, where the interpreter moves from their specific observations to making more general claims that are supported by their observations is a central plank of culture history approaches. It is chronological and geographical ordering of data that is paramount for culture-historical approaches and it is new data, rather than new interpretive frameworks for that data, that is believed to drive the development of archaeological understanding. As witness to this, Gamble (2008) notes that Gordon Childe's *The Dawn of European Civilisation* went through six editions between 1925 and 1957. Interpretation, historical or otherwise, beyond what can be discerned by the attentive archaeologist looking out for indications of change (in both chronological and geographical directions) in the data of the archaeological record, is typically regarded as speculation (Gamble 2008, 23).

In the 1940s and 50s, owing to a generalised cultural positivism (see saseas0471) and/or empiricism (see saseas0214), interpretations of the archaeological record were taken to be subjective; matters of opinion without lasting importance (Trigger 1996). For archaeologists, such as Glyn Daniel, Stuart Piggott, and Christopher Hawkes it was archaeological data that was taken to be central to the discipline. Whereas data is objective interpretations, by contrast, are shaped by intellectual fads and can be undermined by new and improved understanding of data. Figures like Daniel, Piggott, and Hawkes were, in part, reacting to the influential work of idealist philosopher and archaeologist Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943) who had denied that facts and theories were distinct from one another. Collingwood argued that archaeological interpretation is an activity whereby a modern archaeologist attempts to relive the past in their own mind by way of their ideas: these ideas are about the ideas that past peoples had in their minds. It is these past ideas that shaped the archaeological record. By reconstructing these past mental activities that shaped events modern archaeologists could hope to articulate the archaeologically visible dynamics of ancient cultures (Trigger 1996, 303-305).

Writing in the 1970s during the heyday of "New" or "processual archaeology" David Clarke argued that archaeologists utilise five bodies of theory in their intellectual leaps from data to final report the final body of which he termed "interpretive theory". Clarke was sceptical of the broadly intuitive approach used by culture historians in the construction of their historical narratives. He believed that these narratives proceeded without a duly rigorous analysis of the archaeological data which would extract as much information on past behaviour as possible. Clarke went so far to suggest that such narratives represented an "irresponsible art form" (Trigger 1996, 430).

The first body of theory noted by Clarke is "predepositional and depositional theory". This covers relations between human activity, social patterns and environmental factors, and with the samples and traces found in the archaeological record. The second body of theory, dubbed "postdepositional", examines natural and human processes affecting the archaeological record. This includes factors from natural erosion to traces of plowing. Thirdly, "retrieval theory", deals with relations between what survives in the archaeological record and what is recovered in research. Fourthly, "analytical theory", deals with how the data recovered from the archaeological record is treated. As such, analytical theory includes varieties of classification and modelling, testing, and experimental studies. Finally, the fifth body of "interpretive theory" concerns the relations between the archaeological patterns discerned at level four (analytical theory) and the unobservable ancient environmental and behavioural patterns that they express. As Trigger has put it, Clarke's interpretive theory "infers the processes that predepositional theory explains" (Trigger 1996, 432). In Clarke's view, the

challenge facing archaeologists is to establish appropriate bodies of theory for each level of analysis. This will involve incorporating analyses from the biological and physical sciences as well as from archaeology since the human sciences are taken to be restricted to the predepositional and interpretive levels of analysis. Clarke believed that taken together in its entirety, this "theory", in combination with more broadly philosophical issues relating to logic, metaphysics, and epistemology, would combine to create a truly scientific archaeological discipline (see saseas0524).

Processual archaeology conceived of archaeology as anthropological science. It is not specifically allied with humanistic disciplines, such as history. Processual archaeologists value explanation, via methodologies modelled on the hard sciences, over description and/or historical interpretation. Archaeological explanations will incorporate particular observations of the material past drawn from the archaeological record and will incorporate these into cross-cultural generalizations that relate to both natural and social processes. This emphasis on processes is where the designation "processual archaeology" originates. Earlier emphasis on "laws of human behaviour" in archaeology is replaced by a concern with the formative processes of the archaeological record itself. Identification of regularities in the record will allow for inferences about processes "to be made from material remains" (Shanks and Hodder 1995, 3). Processual archaeology, which took for itself the title of "New Archaeology", aimed to discover knowledge of the past that, in aspiration, was objective, neutral, timeless, and singular. Despite these aspirations the fate of interpretation in archaeology did not stop there. Starting in the 1970s an alternative to this approach began to develop. This alternative tendency was named "post-processual archaeology" by Ian Hodder in 1985. In 1991 it was dubbed "interpretive archaeology", again, by Hodder (Trigger 1996). The epithet "interpretive archaeology" is intended to be a positive label for a number of diverse approaches grouped under this banner in place of the lesser relational title "post-processual" (Shanks and Hodder 1995). Hodder described interpretive archaeology as being characterised by a "hermeneutic method" and by 1995 he and Michael Shanks suggested that the term "interpretation" itself is the term that will help to clarify current debates in archaeological theory between processual and post-processual archaeology in the English language.

Shanks and Hodder describe interpretive archaeologies as follows: archaeology is a material practice in the present that "makes things", interpretations, narratives, reports, and so on, out of the archaeological record. These "artefacts" are no less truthful for being produced by researchers. In the foreground of the archaeological enterprise is the interpreter, the archaeologist. Interpretation is a form of practice that requires the interpreter to take responsibility for their interpretations. Like other social practices archaeology is concerned with "meanings". That is, the job of archaeology is to make sense of things and because of this archaeology with be inherently interpretive. Importantly, because it is an interpretive practice the project of archaeology will be ongoing: no final authoritative or definitive account of the past is possible. As a process concerned with meaning or understanding, the concern with causal explanation is diminished in interpretive approaches. Different interpretations of the same subject matter are possible: multivocality (see saseas0466) is embraced and so a plurality of different archaeological interpretations can be produced. These interpretations will reflect different needs and desires. Interpretation is creative (see saseas0140) but it is not uncritical. The needs and desires of interpreters and of groups and communities who have an interest in the material past must be recognised (Shanks and Hodder 1995, 5; Jones and Alberti 2013).

The question “what is interpretation?” is still an open one in archaeology (Jones and Alberti 2013). Recently, over the last decade or so, theoretically orientated archaeologists have moved away from asking broadly epistemological questions, such as “what constitutes archaeological knowledge?”, and toward asking ontological (see saseas0420) ones, such as “what is the nature of archaeological thought?”. What Lucas (2012) has called the “current interpretive dilemma” is bound up with questioning the underlying ontological commitments and metaphysical assumptions of archaeological discourse. Rather than seeking to remove interpretation as the primary goal of archaeology contemporary theoretical archaeologists seek to question the nature of the interpretive process and of the archaeologist’s role in it. This emphasis on questioning follows the identification of a worry that one of the consequences of the emergence of interpretive archaeology, which foregrounded the role of the interpreting archaeologist in the present, was to construct a vision of past human agents as essentially “interpreting subjects”. While archaeologists might always aim at providing an interpretation of the archaeological record archaeological questioning has now recognised that interpretation and reality are co-emergent. That is, all practices, including archaeology, are taken to be “fully relational and constitutive” (Jones and Alberti 2013, 15). This change in perspective in contemporary theory moves away from placing the interpreting subject, as an individual identity, at the centre of things. This move is also sceptical of the view that the human subject is the only being capable of action and interpretation. Human subjects too are taken to be fully relational and performative constructions. The interpreting subject is rethought as relational and as something that emerges within a set of unfolding relationships. The shift from epistemology to ontology in archaeology does not herald the “death of interpretation” or the “death of the interpreting subject” but it does place emphasis on the very constitution of “humanity”, taken as a specific subjectivity, in both the past and the present, as well as questioning the constitution of archaeological interpretation. Rather than representing a radical break with earlier interpretive archaeologies recent theorists have instead revisited a shared group of influences, such as Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari et al, with fresh eyes, questions and so possibilities for interpretation.

SEE ALSO:

saseas0025

saseas0027

saseas0029

saseas0033

saseas0295

saseas0337

saseas0363

saseas0364

saseas0383

saseas0409

saseas0450

saseas0563

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Further Readings:

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